

The Role of Women in the Conservation of Environment with Special Reference to Assam

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Abstract

Environment degradation is one of the major problems of the world. It is now a trending issue to be discussed by the academicians, social scientists, environmentalists and the policy makers. To save the environment from destruction there has been a lot of environmental movements in different parts of the world. In India also different environmental movements are seen in different period of time. Women as more inclined towards the nature have been an integral part of all the environment protection movements. This paper tries to understand the connection of nature and women and the role of women in different environmental movements in India. Moreover, it focuses on women environmental activists from Assam who are working to protect the environment.

Keywords: women, environment, movement, degradation, India, Assam

INTRODUCTION

“Advancing gender equality, through reversing the various social and economic handicaps that make women voiceless and powerless, may also be one of the best ways of saving the environment.” —Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics

Two most sensitive issues, on which many researchers are working on are environmentalism and gender. From the mid 1990's a new trend in academics has developed which connects both environment and gender. The recent development has shown interest in studying women as agents of change, which includes women as saviors of the environment. The Millennium Development Goals in its objective include

both, gender equality and environmental sustainability. Involving women in protecting the environment would help societies develop the sense of responsibility needed to maintain a good balance between humans and the earth's resources. Women play significant role in protecting environment as well as the management of natural resources and they are major contributors to environment rehabilitation and conservation. Women through their roles as farmers and as collectors of water and firewood have a close connection with their local environment and often suffer most directly from environmental problems.

Environmentalism is used as a general term to refer to concern for the environment and particularly actions or

advocacy to limit negative human impacts on the environment. (Davies, 2020). Now, the question may arise, what gender equality has to do with environmentalism? History has been the evidence that gender equality creates a base for the conservation of the environment. For example: evidences show that the parliaments having more women members are more likely to ratify environmental treaties (Elwell & Williams, 2016). Women, traditionally, are more inclined towards the nature. Thus the degradation of environment put an attack directly on the women's lives. Studies show that women are primarily responsible for collecting drinkable water and other day to day livelihood activities which are highly dependent on the resources of the environment (Elwell & Williams, 2016).

'Women play an essential role in the management of natural resources including soil, water, forests and energy and often has a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world among them' (World Bank, 1991). A lot of studies on environment and women showed that the intimate connection of women with nature makes women more conscious and sensitive towards nature with a great skill of natural resource management. Degradation of environment and exhaustion of natural resources is pernicious for the life, time, income, health of the women. The close bonding between women and nature led to the development of the theory called 'Ecofeminism'. According to this theory, nature and women both are extremely vulnerable to the exploitation done by patriarchal and capitalist hegemony (Shiva & Mies, 1993).

WOMAN IN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

These are the reasons for which women are deeply attached with the different environment protection movements. Globally, Rachel Carson is known as the mother of environmental movements because of the questions she raised in her book 'Silent Spring' in the year 1962 where she talked about the consequences of using chemical pesticides (Women and Environmental Movements and Policies in India).

A wide range of protests have emerged globally under the leadership of women in different parts of the globe to save environment from destruction. For example in 1978 Love Canal Homeowners Association Movement, protests to save Amazon forest by the Amazonian women, Green Belt Movement in Kenya, Anti Militarist Movement in US and Europe, Dhama Raksha Reforestation Program in Thailand by the rural Thai women, protest against the Three Gorges Dam Project in China etc.

In Indian context, women have a very close connection with the environmental movements. The origin of the environment protection movement in India dates back to Kehjali movement and gained its peak through Chipko movement, Appiko movement, Save Silent Valley movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan which succinctly show the extensive participation of women (Mago & Gunwal, 2019). During that period the eco-feminism theory developed in India which established conceptual interlinkage between sexist oppression and environment degradation.

Harsh Sethi has divided women movement into five categories. 1. Forest

based, 2. Land use, 3. Against big dams, 4. Against pollution created by industries, 5. Against overexploitation of marine resources (**Women and Environmental Movements and Policies in India**).

The environmental movements in India widely participated by women are shown in the table below:

Table:1

Sl no	Name	Year	Women leaders	Place	Cause
1	Bishnoi's Movement	1731	Amrit Bai	Khejarallai	To save Khejri trees
2	Chipko movement	1972	Bachni Devi & Gauri Devi	Uttarkhand	To save the forest in Terai region of Himalayan foothills
3	Silent Valley Movement	1976	Sugatha kumari	Kerala	Against construction of dam for hydroelectric power project in Silent Valley
4	Appiko movement	1983		Karnataka	To protect Western ghat forests
5	Navdanya Movement	1984	Vandana Shiva	Different states of India	Focused on Biodiversity and traditional seed bank
6	Narmada Bachao Andolan	1985	Medha Pateker	Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh	Against the Construction of Dams on the Narmada River funded by World Bank
7	Nadi Bachao Abhiyan	2008	Radha Bhatt	Uttarakhand	Against the Hydroelectric power project on Ganga

Source: Compiled by the authors

Moreover, there are a lot of organizations who work for the protection of environment. For example: Deccan Development Society in Telangana, started

in 1983 that works towards sustainable agriculture, Self Employment Women's Association (SEWA) of India, a collective of over two million poor women working

to adopt small-scale clean technologies (Mago & Gunwal, 2019).

In India, a number of women are there who worked hard to save the environment from destruction.

1. **Amrita Bai:** She was the first woman of India who lost her life in the attempt to protect the Khejri trees from cutting in Rajasthan. She belonged to the Bishnoi community.
2. **Gaura Devi and Bachni Devi:** They were the leaders of the Chipko movement. They organized the women to hug the trees to save from cutting. The Chipko movement is known as the mother of all environmental movements in India.
3. **Sunita Narain:** She was a frontline environmentalist of India who was the chairperson of the Tiger Task Force for conservation in 2005. She was a member of Prime Minister Council for climate change and National Ganga River Basin Authority (Mago & Gunwal, 2019).
4. **Medha Patkar:** She was an environmental activist who mobilized the people against the dam projects on the Narmada River. She questioned the existing model of development and demanded for an alternative model which is more sustainable and environment friendly. She followed democratic and non violent means of protest.
5. **Menaka Gandhi:** She was an environmentalist of India and a frontline worker of protection of animal rights. She founded 'People for Animals' an animal welfare organization in India.
6. **Vandana Shiva:** Well known for her writings about eco-feminism, Vandana

Shiva is also famous for her works to protect forests and biodiversity. She was awarded many titles, honored as 'environmental hero' for her works towards the environment. She was the leader of Navdanya movement also.

7. **Radha Bhatt:** She fought against the hydroelectric power projects on Ganga in 2008. She organized a 2000 km march for the rights for water.

MAJOR POLICIES AND PROGRAMS OF ENVIRONMENT AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON WOMEN

The Indian government has adopted various environmental policies for the safeguard of the environment and for sustainable development/

The National Environment Policy (2006) recognises that a diverse developing society such as ours provides numerous challenges in the economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental arenas. All of these coalesce in the dominant imperative of alleviation of mass poverty, reckoned in the multiple dimensions of livelihood security, health care, education, empowerment of the disadvantaged, and elimination of gender disparities. (**The National Environment Policy 2006**)

National Forest Policy 1988 and Joint Forest Management (JFM) program of the 1990s mandated that women comprise 33% of the membership of the Vana Samarakshana Samitis. This inclusion of women to a large extent explains the success of the program in different states. The logic behind its creation was that the problem of deforestation could be better handled if the state Forest Departments worked out joint management agreements with local communities to reforest

degraded forest. (**National Forest Policy 1988**)

Biodiversity Act 2002 – sees important role for women as stakeholders and custodians of traditional knowledge. Historically, women have been the seed keepers in farming communities.

Water harvesting programs across India see more women participants working in partnership with the state and NGOs. Water has gender dimensions. Women and men derive different benefits from its availability, use and management. Women were active participants in the Sukhomajri village in Shivalik range of the Himalaya in Haryana that earned nationwide acclaim for the way in which they had utilised their forests and water to their benefit. When women are involved in water management decisions the community benefits. Gujarat Water Policy (2002) too mentions that women are the most interested users of rural water supply, domestic urban water consumption, in health and sanitation issues as well as agricultural production and sees a crucial role for grassroots women in local water management. (**Gujarat Water Policy 2002**)

Renewable energy policies in rural areas address women in households with biogas plants and solar cookers / panels. Poor women need to benefit from clean and green cooking energy. Policymakers need to recognize the importance of women in the energy sector and to engage them directly in policy making and project design. Energy policies and programs that recognize women's work and roles in the energy sectors, can be effective in promoting access to sustainable energy solutions.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM

Assam is a land of culture, history, biodiversity, natural resources etc. It is an area full of different tribes residing here from a very long period of time. The forest area of Assam is decreasing day by day due to human encroachment. History shows that the tribal people are more inclined towards the environment as their livelihood depends upon nature. Especially, the women play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity and the environment from destruction.

In Assam, most of the tribal people are dependent on nature. The traditions, festivals, cultures of the various tribes have a close connection with the nature. For example: Bihu festival of Assam, Bathou Puja of Bodos, Ali Aai Lrigang of Mising, Baitho of Kacharis etc. The tribal women of Assam have tremendous knowledge about nature and natural medicine. Tanushree Sarkar, in her study showed that in Assam, Bodo women conserve about 48 different plants to use for socio-cultural and religious purposes in the BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council) area (**Goswami,2020**).

The natural environment conservation success rate in Assam is increasing. A lot of women from Assam are trying to protect the environment in different ways.

Rupjyoti Gogoi, a resident of Bocha Gaon, near Kaziranga National Park, started an enterprise named 'Village Weaves' who gather the wastes- plastic bottles, packets of snacks, water bottles to create handloom products from it. From 2004 this enterprise has empowered more than 2300 women from different villages

of Assam contributing towards the conservation of nature (**Lal, 2021**).

Dr. Purnima Devi Barman known as 'Hargila Baido' (Miss Hargila) is a well known environment activist of Assam. She is a member of the NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) 'Aranyak'. She is continuously giving her efforts to save the 'Greater Adjutant Stork' (Hargila in Assamese) from extinction. The New Zealand High Commission is also extended its helping hand for the 'Hargila Army' consists of the rural women of Assam (**WiNN News, 2019**). Barman also achieved the prestigious Green Oscars Award 2017 for her relentless works to save Hargila in Dadara, Pachariya and Hingimari villages of Kamrup (**United News of India, 2022**).

Recently, Nizara Phukan, a PhD student of Jawaharlal Nehru University completed a 2000 km march from her home district Charaideo to New Delhi 'to save mother Earth'. She wanted to create awareness among the people for planting trees. She, with her friends started an organization named 'Brikhyabandhu' which works to save environment and tackle climate change (**The Telegraph, 22nd Dec, 2019**).

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is clear that Women plays a very vital role in protecting environment and contributing towards the better ways of preserving the same. Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is, therefore, is essential to achieving sustainable development. Women, particularly those living in rural areas or mountain areas have a special relationship

with the environment. Women in different parts of the world are actively involved in saving the environment, but there is still limited recognition of their contribution. If sustainable development is a goal of the global community, the role of women in achieving this has to be underscored.

In recent time one of the most prominent issue in international sphere is the degradation of the environment. There are lots of examples of the environmental hazards in recent times . Recently in Assam nearly 100 endangered vultures found dead near the Chhaygaon area in Assam's Kamrup district. Vultures are often overlooked and perceived as lowly scavengers, but they play a crucial role in the environments in which they live. A vulture is a bird of prey that scavenges for its food, meaning that it searches the ground for animal carcasses to eat. Typically, these carcasses are what is left uneaten by other predators. The decline in vulture populations in some parts of the world, including India, may have serious consequences for ecosystems and humans alike, according to a new study that suggests poisoning is the greatest extinction risk facing the scavengers.

Not only the role woman is underrated but there is also the lack of adequate government role in protecting the environment. Recently amidst the Covid 19 there was huge on going protest against the protection of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve in all over India. The protestors are urging the Prime Minister of India, the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of India, the Chief Minister of Assam and the NBWL to stop any current and future coal mining project in Saleki and the whole of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve, stating that legal

and illegal coal extraction is having and will have catastrophic consequences for the whole ecosystem of the region.

Environment is now is not only a national but also an international concern and there are lots of ongoing movements for the protection and maintenance of the eco-friendly environment . lot of activist are engage in protecting the environment . In Assam activist like Dr Purnima Devi Barman .Rupjyoti Gogoi and Nizara Phukan etc are strongly working for the protection of environment. There is an improvement in the part people for the protection of the environment and it the high time we should realize our responsibility towards the protection of our environment.

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